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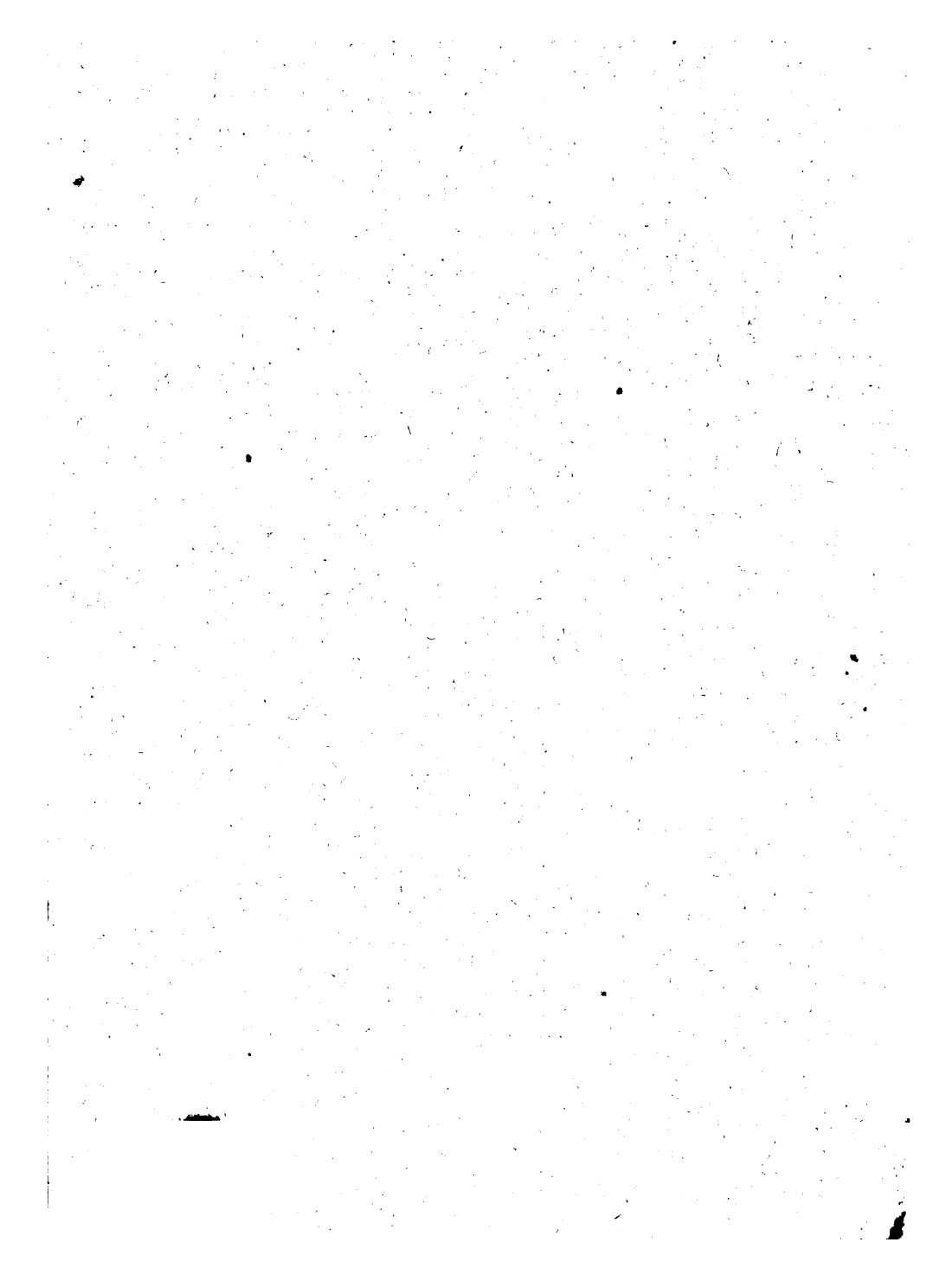


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THE GOSPEL OF THE AUTUMN LEAF

BY

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*The calm, sweet sunshine of October now
Warms the low spot; upon its grassy mould,
The purple oak-leaf falls; the birchen bough
Drops its rich spoil like arrow-heads of gold.
—Bryant.*



Published by the
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
OAK PARK, ILL.

1900

TO THE READER.

Something of the favor with which this sermon was received by the congregation to which it was delivered was doubtless due to its timeliness, to the musical selections which accompanied it, and to the appropriateness of the church decorations, which were of autumn leaves, with the text, in letters of the same, suspended by willing and skillful hands above the pulpit. Not a little also was doubtless due to the commentary which the outer world supplied in the beauty and swift passing of the October foliage. These cannot be reproduced in print. Nevertheless, there were some who heard the sermon who thought that its printing might do good, and the officers of the church have asked for its publication.

A sermon is a falling leaf, shaken from the crowded bough of a busy life. Not infrequently it flutters away and leaves no mark of permanent influence. Yet here and there are found afterward some of these leaves, pressed and cared for by those to whom they brought cheer while falling, and a pleasant memory afterward. If this printed sermon, this pressed leaf, may find its way into the keeping of any to whom its admonition shall bring a solemn reminder of the shortness of life and the imperative of its duties, and an assurance of the comfort and hope which also the sermon attempts to convey, the author will rejoice, and the kindness of those who have asked for its preservation will be justified.

W. E. B.

First Church Study, Oak Park, Oct. 21, 1900.

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THE GOSPEL OF THE AUTUMN LEAF.

"We all do fade as a leaf." Isaiah lxiv, 6.

Nature holds a constant mirror before the face of man. In its continuous changes he discovers anew the changes that are constant in his own life. The life of man has its analogy in the procession of the seasons. "We all grow old and die," is a commonplace, too trite to appeal to the emotions of men who have always known, and so have half forgotten it. But "We all do fade as a leaf," is a truth that paints itself anew across the face of nature with the coming of every autumn; and he who runs may read, not only the story of the passing season, but the story of his own life as well.

THE LEAF'S MESSAGE OF HUMAN FRAILTY.

The Brevity of Life.

The life of man is like the life of the leaf. "All flesh is grass," and grass is nothing more nor less than leaves. The life of man endures but a single generation, which in human life is but a single season, and then falling with multitudes of its kindred leaves, it is gathered to those that in past centuries have grown and fallen. Hear the pathetic cry of the old man that has echoed itself down the centuries, mourning for the swift passing of the generations of earth,—

Thou carriest them away as with a flood;
They are as a sleep,
In the morning they are like grass which groweth up.
In the morning it flourisheth and groweth up;
In the evening it is cut down, and withereth.
For we are consumed by thine anger;
And by thy wrath are we troubled.
For all our days are passed away in thy wrath:
We spend our years, as a tale that is told.
The days of our years are threescore years and ten;
And if by reason of strength they be fourscore years,
Yet is their strength labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
So teach us to number our days,
That we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

—Psalm xc: 5-7, 9, 10, 12.

Revised 4-8-36 g3m

The Uncertainty of Life.

In uncertainty, also, as well as in brevity, the life of man is kindred to the leaf. Four score years are attained, if at all, "by reason of strength," and the average of life is less than half this common maximum. Not every leaf lives till winter. The early frosts blight them; the storms of spring shake them from the trees and carpet the earth with their fallen verdure; rain and hail and insect life and summer heat claim each their quota; and a large proportion of the leaves that compose the bright robe of spring go to the making of untimely shrouds before the first frost of autumn builds a loom for the weaving of Nature's burial robe. So infancy has its frosts, and youth has its devastating storms, and manhood experiences the withering heat of daily care, and all know the driving tempests of sorrow that beat upon all flesh. Verily the old time poet chose well his simile, "We all do fade, as a leaf."

The Hebrew poet is not the sole possessor of this thought. Many another poet, since his day, has used the same simile. Our own Dr. Holmes, in 1831, wrote of a man who had survived his companions of earlier years his poem "The Last Leaf." Long before his own death, which occurred more than three score years afterward, he was reminded of his youthful verse, and came to apply it to himself. I have a copy of his poems with his autograph on the flyleaf, and these are the lines that accompany his signature,—

"And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the Spring,
Let them smile as I do now
At the old forgotten bough
Where I cling."

Man Has Reason to Glory.

Yet, some man will say, "I am no leaf, but a tree. I am deep rooted, and have survived the passing of fifty seasons. I have seen the leaves fall half a hundred times, and I glory in my superiority to these external changes."

This glorying is not without reason. Well may man glory in his strength, his wisdom, and his length of years.

The Glory of Man's Strength.

Man glories in his strength; and well he may. He comes into the world, naked, weak, weaponless, most helpless and dependent of all living things, yet speedily becomes the strongest. Whose strength can stand against his own? He has not the sight of the eagle, but he makes for himself a telescope which leaves the eagle's vision in the nearer foreground, while he explores the distant worlds. He has not the speed of the horse, but he makes the horse's speed his own, and, longing for speed still greater, builds for himself a locomotive, and then sets himself to inventing a flying machine. He has not the strength of the ox, but he commands the torrents to turn the wheels of his factories, snatches the fire from the clouds like Prometheus and with it lights his cities, breasts the waves of oceans, scales the summits of mountains, tunnels the earth for its hidden treasures, digs canals where he has decreed to create rivers, and piles up pyramids which rival in bulk and durability the everlasting hills.

The Glory of Man's Wisdom.

He glories in his wisdom, and that with good reason. His knowledge begins at zero, with even instinct feebly developed, and he learns slowly and with great effort and many mistakes. He secures at best an uncertain knowledge of the past; he has a slipping hold upon the fleeting present; and he is in the densest ignorance of the future. Yet he gathers from tradition, from literature, from perishing relics and from the rocks the history of past ages. He discovers the laws of his own being. He forces from the silent lips of dead and forgotten centuries the secrets of their civilizations. He digs into earth's strata, and learns how God stretched the line upon the earth and laid its corner stone; he almost hears the song of the morning stars at the creation, and the shouts of the sons of God over a new sphere for the revelation of God's goodness. He learns how

God shut up the sea with doors, saying, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed." He enters into the springs of the sea, and there lays his cables, and his thoughts traverse the recesses of the deep, and reach the minds of kindred souls on shores remote. He enters into the treasures of the snow and hail, and he knows where is the dwelling of light.

Nor is this all. His mind, trained by these material things as an athlete's muscles are trained by rings and bars and weights, grapples with mysteries where mind measures its strength not against material problems, but against the challenge of Infinite Mind itself. This is the supreme and most glorious quality of human intellect. The height to which man has climbed over the abyss of his natal ignorance is so incredibly great, that man himself fails to appreciate it, lacking in the range of his experience any standard by which to measure it. He reasons. He discovers axioms which the mind affirms to be eternally true, and he assures himself that he knows these things in the same way that God knows them, and that no world present or to come can change them. He proclaims with unwavering certainty necessary truths and relations. Among the scores of messages which come to him professing to be from God, he sits in judgment, pronouncing even among objects of worship which he shall recognize as God, and which revelation he shall account divine. Learning that God has laws, he, as God's representative, himself makes laws, and hearing the Divine mandate in their moral imperative, utters as their enacting clause, "Thus saith the Lord." Who shall assign a limit to the inventive genius, the acquisitive ability, the ambition for learning, or the capacity for moral growth on the part of man? Compared with all other forms of animal life his power to learn and to know is wonderful; but compared with the ignorance of his own infancy or the gross darkness of his own savagery, the glory of thinking, reasoning, learning, worshipping man is beyond the power of any words that man is accustomed to use except as he applies them to God himself.

The Glory of Man's Longevity.

And man glories in his length of life. Few forms of vegetable life survive him, and few as well of animal life. The dog is old at ten; the ox at fifteen; the horse at twenty; but man's years are three score and ten, and by reason of strength they become four score. He sees days and nights chase each other in ceaseless procession round the earth, and his life stretches on through uncounted alterations of light and shade as measured by the rising and declining sun. He sees moons wax and wane, seasons come and go, his own works perish and rise again as his continued life demands their continuance beyond their normal expectancy. The man of four score has seen empires rise and decay; he has seen the birth and death of eighty seasons; almost a thousand times the moon has waxed and waned in his sight; as many times as the old chronology reckoned years between Christ and the Creation his life has measured weeks, each one as rich in God's creative work as that when man first entered the earth as the garden of the Lord; and twenty-nine thousand two hundred days, each full to the brim of rich and varied experiences, have come to him, each with its labor and its repose, each with its joy and its pain, each with its memory and its hope, each with its sunrise growing toward the noon, each with its twilight deepening into night; and the evening and the morning have been the ten thousandth day, and the man still was young.

The Swift Passing of this Glory.

All these qualities in the life of man, his strength, his wisdom, his longevity, suggest to us the strong trunk, and it may be depressing to turn again and remind ourselves how much, even in these respects where man is greatest, his glory is that of the leaf.

Is man strong? How quickly is his strength spent! How wearied is he with the toil of a single day! How prone is he to accident, how subject to illness! A brief sickness, a trivial mishap, and his strength is gone. Shorn of it like Samson of old, he frets in unavailing impatience against his unwonted

weakness, and marvels that ever it lay so perilously near to his strength.

Has man great wisdom? How fleeting is his power of mind! Under the strain of life's constant burdens his memory fades; clouded by the weakness of years perception grows feeble, and desire fails; reason treads with halting step and leans heavily upon the staff of habit; and often intellect totters and sometimes in grief departs in a single night.

Is the life of man a long life, as measured against the background of nature? Half the race dies in infancy, and he who survives to man's estate engages in a running fight with disease and accident and death. Not the sword thrust only, but the prick of a needle may end his life; not alone the bite of the serpent, the sting of the bee may prove fatal. The latest word from the laboratory is that the deadly malaria travels in the mosquito bite; and for the deadlier bacillus that kills him by thousands man searches with his microscope. How can man count himself strong when he fears such trivial foes? Surely his length of days is a hand-breadth; and his age as nothing. It is the race that gives to life its trunk; the life of one man is the life of the leaf.

"Leaves have their time to fall

And flowers to wither at the north wind's breath,

And stars to set, but all,—

Thou hast all seasons for thine own, O Death."

—Mrs. Hemans.

The Decay of Sin.

Moreover, if we begin the enumeration of man's frailties we are not yet done. There is yet to be reckoned one prime, nay the prime, occasion of the brevity and peril of human life. The words which precede and those which follow the text show us that short as life is, the prophet's lament is not always on account of its brevity; life is often quite long enough, and sometimes it seems too long. The most withering of all the forces that affect us are those that blight the character, and leave the body to be blown about by the winds of lust and hate when the soul is already dead.

Israel was about to return from exile to the land of their fathers. The enterprise began well, and with large prophetic promises. "Comfort ye my people," the message had gone forth, "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished." It was a message to thrill the nation to its very heart, and the nation was thrilled. The winter of the exile was at an end. The life of a new spring was in the old and fallen nation. There came forth a shoot from the broken stump of former national life, and it clothed itself with verdure that promised a rich fruitage in righteousness. But when the movement is at its height the prophet discovers the heartbreaking fact that this promise is not to be fulfilled by the whole people. Bearing the burden of the nation's fall, and cherishing the sublime hope of its restoration, he is all but dismayed by the lack of stability in its promise of goodness.

Even as the Master came later to a fig tree by the wayside hoping from its conspicuous display of foliage to find fruit, and found it not, so the prophet, when he came to inspect the nation's promise at short range, found nothing but leaves, and badly withered leaves at that. Hear the prophet as he tells of the goodness of God, and then relates his own—and God's—bitter disappointment in their fickle and transitory goodness,—

I will mention the loving kindnesses of the Lord,
And the praises of the Lord,
According to all that the Lord hath bestowed upon us,
And the great goodness toward the house of Israel,
Which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies,
And according to the multitude of his loving-kindnesses.

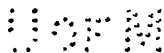
For he said,
Surely they are my people,
Children that will not lie:
So he was their Saviour.

In all their affliction he was afflicted,
And the angel of his presence saved them;
In his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
And he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.

Is. xliii, 7-9.

But we are all as an unclean thing,
And all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags;
And we all do fade as a leaf;
And our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Is. xlii, 6.



Let us not err as some have done by supposing that the characterization of this form of human righteousness as "filthy rags" indicates that the best possible human endeavor is loathsome in God's sight. No righteousness that is real righteousness is hateful to God. It was a ragged and filthy nation. Their filthiness was covered with a pretense of cleanliness, and hence went on unrebuked to greater filth; their rags were covered over with thin but luxuriant draperies of abundant profession and ritual, and thus the rags below, that could not hide the spiritual nakedness, grew to rents and tatters and thought themselves a gorgeous vesture. Thus the leaves of professional religion did not grow to righteousness, but shrivelled to decay and fell from the branch that now stood almost bare beside the long dead stump; and the people's iniquities, that had carried the nation into exile, now piled the hopes of restoration into sad and moldering heaps in which there was no life. Even so by reason of sin does the life of man fade like the leaf, and his iniquities like the wind carry him away.

The Lesson for our own Life.

All these leaf-like elements of instability are in our own life. The text of to-day we read in history and in our own experience. But lest we should forget it, it is writ large in nature. As we came to the house of God this morning through the mellow autumn sunlight, we walked upon a carpet of fallen leaves. Those that remain on the trees will soon be shivering in the frost, dripping with the cold rains, fading even in the furtive sunshine that should give them transitory cheer, and clinging desperately with a last mad hope ere the shrill wind whistling by tears them also from their season's home and hold on life, and drives them, soiled, crumpled, and despairing into sad, dead heaps. Nature is shaking off her gorgeous shroud, and ere long will stand, gaunt and stark, the ominous skeleton of her former self. We may not view this with too great consciousness of our own superiority, for this very autumn brings us nearer to life's winter. and the fading of the forest is the symbol of our own fading. "We all do fade as a leaf."

We cannot escape this lesson. We may shut our ears to the sermon from the pulpit, and bind all the voices of our soul to be silent even as King Midas of old told his life secret to his barber and swore him to silence; but as of old the barber, overburdened with the trust reposed in him, dug a hole in the earth and whispered that secret into it, and filled the hole again, even so has some power told the secret to Nature, and as of old we may hear the very blades of grass telling to each other what we would hide from our own souls. The elm drops on us its gold wedges that remind us that the thin edge of death has already found its entering place in our lives. The maple drops its five fingered symbol like the laying of a skeleton hand upon us. The oak, holding office till his successor is elected and qualified, and determined not to loosen a single leaf till the new life of spring drives him forth as a usurper, still lets go now and then and flutters down, pale with defeat or red with disappointment or purple with rage, and hurries past us, driven by the gust, protesting as he goes against that power which is deaf alike to his protest and to ours. "We all do fade as a leaf."



THE LEAF'S MESSAGE OF COMFORT AND HOPE.

But shall we learn no other lessons from the leaves than these? Shall we have only a melancholy lesson for these so-called "melancholy days?" Shall we learn nothing more than we have already learned from the chill of this autumn morning? Nay, let us seek a little further, if perchance we may find some more cheering message.

God's Kindness and Care.

The autumn leaves may teach us a message of God's kindness and care. Scientific men are able to tell us the reasons for the colors of the flowers. There is utility in them, they say. There is method in Nature's mad revel in the colors of her blossoms. There is a reason for the beauty of her swaddling clothes. It is not without a purpose that she revels in perfume. When she makes earth red with roses and white with lilies and pink with apple blossoms and fragrant with a thousand lovely

scents, she is seeking to perpetuate life, and knows the way to do it. But how shall we explain the colors of the autumn leaf? It has served its purpose, and has but to return to dust; why may it not take to itself Nature's cheapest pigment, and turning to brown or black, drop in its mourning robe to where it may speedily return to dust? It has no honey for the bee, no pollen for which another tree is waiting; there is no utility in its wealth of beauty; why may it not drop colorless into the grave?

Mr. Stockton wrote a story a few years ago in which Aunt Patsy, a superannuated negress, eagerly anticipating death, restrained her impetuous desire to die by an effort to complete a crazy-quilt, which was to be her shroud. She wanted to live just long enough to finish it, and then to hurry and die before any one else appeared among the angels in a robe of that gay pattern.

Sometimes it seems to me that Nature cherishes the same quaint whim; for why should she make her shroud of all the colors that Aunt Patsy could have wrought into her unique burial robe? Did not the ignorant old woman casting about in her mind for a fit raiment for death, hit upon what has been Nature's plan for uncounted centuries?

But, ah, it is more than a mere conceit of Nature, whimsical as the old dame may be. It is a token,—and shall we not so receive it?—of the goodness of God that will drape even our sorrows in bright hues, if we will let Him. So for a few short days, lest we lose heart at Nature's dying, he paints the forests with a brush dipped in the rainbow. If God so clothe the falling leaf, that yesterday was on the tree and to-day shall be trampled in the gutter, shall he not much more care for you, O ye of little faith?

The Value of the Individual Leaf.

But even a leaf has its value. Do you remember that wonderful passage in the writings of this same prophet, where he tells us of the coming Prince,—“The bruised reed shall he not break”? A reed is a leaf. Even when bruised and withering, it has a

value. O my brother of the crushed life, believe that God cares for you! Believe that even when you fall, you are not unnoticed or uncared for by Him.

One day when Jesus was on earth and was dining with a Pharisee, the trunk of whose righteousness was thought to know no inclination, there came and threw herself at Jesus's feet a bruised reed. Bowed one day by a strong wind of passion, she had fallen across the path, and had been trampled upon. From that day, bad men had trampled her the lower, and good men had spurned her; she bore a bruise from the foot of every man, good or bad, whom she had met. There were those present who were ready to say, "Moses commanded that such should be stoned;" and the Pharisee said in his heart, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known that this is a bruised reed, and would cast her away." But Jesus bound up that bruised life, and transplanted it into a new soil, and its withering ceased, and its root found new life, and it became a thing of beauty that blooms forever in God's paradise.

Could you hold an autumn leaf in your hand, though a strong wind were blowing? Even so can God hold you though temptation blows a hurricane. He can do more. He can graft your life into the true Vine, that it may draw its life from God itself; and because He lives ye shall live also.

The Leaf and the Bud.

Let the leaves teach us one more lesson. Look on the branch where the leaf fell; what do you find? A bud. The office of the leaf, in part, was to protect that bud, the germ of another life. The life of the bud is more than the life of the leaf; by so much is the life to come better than the life that now is. We do not drop from our places on the tree of mortal life with no hope of living again. This life shelters the bud of immortality. We dare not think of our own fading as without promise of blooming; we are unwilling to face a winter of the soul that has no promise of the springtime. All the life of a sycamore leaf it hides from the world, completely covered by its stem, the bud

of next year's growth; even so do our bodies hide and protect the life of our souls.

Not everything is perishable. Goodness is immortal. Of the good man it is written, "His leaf also shall not wither." The very frost that causes the leaf to fall breaks open the shell of the seed that lies buried among the leaves, and prepares the way for the pent up life within to break forth when Spring returns to earth; so disappointment, sorrow, and, if we have faith to believe it, death itself, all have their mission in bringing into newness of life the life more abundant.

"Else why this pleasing hope, this fond desire, this longing after immortality?

Or why this secret dread, this inward horror of falling into naught? Why shrinks the soul back on itself, and startles at destruction?

'Tis the Divinity that stirs within us! 'Tis heaven itself that points out an hereafter,
And intimates eternity for man!"

Be comforted, O my friend of the sad heart! Next season's joys shall bloom from the bud of this year's griefs; and where to-day are only the scars of life that has fallen from the bough of your cherished hope and lies silent and desolate, shall yet spring forth the larger, fuller and more blessed hope that grows in God's eternal springtime.

Fall, then, ye leaves of autumn, that have lived your life and now are passing away. All these hot months ye have given breath to the trees, and grateful shade to us. Yours is a work well done; enter into your rest. But O, teach us as ye fall, your double lesson of solemnity and of hope! Descend upon us like silent hands laid on us from heaven with a benediction, and bring to us a message from God, written in your crimson and your gold! Teach us that while fading with you, and sharing your frailty, we share also with you the hope that is in the bud, and the promise of the life beyond. So shall the leaves of the trees this day be like the leaves of the tree of life, which are for the healing of the nations.